

R.J. Reynolds' Targeting of African Americans: 1988–2000

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A major conclusion of the US surgeon general's report *Tobacco Use Among US Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups* is that African Americans bear the greatest health burden related to smoking of any racial/ethnic minority group.¹ Thus, a major challenge for tobacco control advocates is that of designing prevention and cessation programs that reach African Americans. One source of information to guide these programs is the tobacco industry's well-funded and well-researched efforts to target African Americans.²

An example of a highly visible effort by the tobacco industry to target African Americans was R.J. Reynolds (RJR) Tobacco Company's plan to launch a new cigarette brand, Uptown, in 1990. Uptown was created specifically for the African American market segment and was to be test marketed in Philadelphia, Pa. However, a Philadelphia tobacco control group, the Uptown Coalition, forced RJR to withdraw Uptown just 6 weeks after its launch was announced and before the first Uptown cigarette was advertised or sold.^{3,4} These public events surrounding Uptown have been well documented,^{5–9} but RJR's internal documents demonstrate that Uptown represented only 1 visible manifestation of the company's efforts to promote smoking among African Americans through product development and advertising.

The company's internal documents, however, provide evidence only of how RJR had *planned* to target the African American market segment. To determine whether, in fact, RJR's plans for targeting this group were implemented beyond the creation of Uptown, it is necessary to seek other evidence of RJR's targeting efforts. Through the use of triangulation,¹⁰ in this case involving a review of print advertisements, we sought to determine whether RJR used the Uptown targeting plan in non-Uptown advertising campaigns and whether this plan has continued to the present.

Thus, the purposes of this article are (1) to describe RJR's strategy to target African Americans, as revealed in tobacco industry

Objectives. The purpose of this study was to describe RJ Reynolds (RJR) Tobacco Company's strategy for targeting African Americans, as revealed in tobacco industry documents and magazine advertisements.

Methods. The authors searched industry documents to determine RJR's strategies and analyzed magazine advertising during 2 periods: the time of the launch of the company's Uptown cigarette (1989–1990) and a decade later (1999–2000).

Results. RJR's efforts to target the African American market segment existed before and after Uptown, and the company's strategy was largely implemented via other RJR brands. Advertisements featured mentholated cigarettes, fantasy/escape, expensive objects, and nightlife.

Conclusions. To help all populations become tobacco-free, tobacco control practitioners must understand and counter tobacco industry strategies. (*Am J Public Health.* 2003;93:822–827)

internal documents, and (2) to report the results of a content analysis comparing RJR's advertising in magazines popular among African Americans with its advertising in a magazine popular among White Americans. In our content analysis, we examined whether RJR's advertising strategies could be observed in non-Uptown advertisements appearing around the time of the Uptown launch (1989–1990) and whether these strategies persisted and were evident a decade later (1999–2000). Although we focus here exclusively on RJR, RJR was not the only tobacco company targeting African Americans,^{1,11} and the limited focus of this article should not be construed as implying that RJR was unique in pursuing targeted marketing efforts.

METHODS

Our research involved 2 phases. We conducted a systematic search of tobacco industry documents to assess RJR's strategies for reaching African Americans. On the basis of the targeting strategies revealed in these documents, we conducted a content analysis of the company's cigarette magazine advertising.

Search Strategies

Accepted searching techniques¹² were used to conduct searches between April 2001 and April 2002 on tobacco industry

Web sites, including <http://www.rjrtdocs.com>, <http://www.tobaccoinstitute.com>, and <http://www.pmdocs.com>, containing internal company documents released as a result of lawsuits filed against the industry. The industry's Web sites have been found to contain information comparable to that contained in the independently monitored Minnesota Depository.¹³ When the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (<http://www.legacy.library.ucsf.edu>) opened in January 2002, supplemental searches were conducted to confirm that we had reached saturation.

We first used title and topic searches to gather basic information about the Uptown product launch. Examples of keywords included "uptown," "project ut," "ut," and "African American." These searches provided several entry points into additional documents. We then reviewed documents with adjacent Bates numbers and with source or file names related to major documents. In total, we reviewed approximately 21 000 documents. The most important of these documents (approximately 350) are posted on the Tufts University Digital Library Web site (<http://nils.lib.tufts.edu/index.html>).

Content Analysis Strategies

We collected all RJR cigarette advertisements published in 4 magazines—3 that are read primarily by African Americans (*Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* [hereafter "JEE"]) and 1

TABLE 1—Definitions of Constructs Used to Code Cigarette Advertisements

Construct	Definition
Escape/fantasy	Depicts people/objects/scenarios with exaggeration or apparent digital “doctoring”; escape/fantasy advertisements often depict a character, action, or scene that is unlikely to occur in real life
Expensive objects	Suggests that the object requires disposable income to purchase; the item may have a practical function but has features or characteristics that elevate the price; not readily affordable
Nightlife	Depicts social activities that occur after business hours rather than daytime activities such as basketball, skiing, gardening, and the like.

that has a large White readership (*People Weekly* [PW])—during a pair of 2-year periods, the years surrounding Uptown’s launch (1989–1990) and a decade later (1999–2000). On the basis of our analysis of tobacco industry documents, we generated our hypotheses that RJR advertisements published in JEE would be more likely than RJR advertisements published in PW to (1) emphasize nightlife, (2) feature images of escape/fantasy, (3) equate cigarette use with use of expensive objects, and (4) promote mentholated brands.

We identified 379 advertisements that appeared in the 4 study publications during 1989–1990 and 1999–2000. Some advertisements appeared only once; others appeared more than 10 times. Advertisements appearing more than once were weighted accordingly in the data analysis (e.g., an advertisement that appeared 5 times was counted 5 times in the analysis).

Our coding scheme followed widely recognized content analysis methods,^{14–22} particularly methods designed for analysis of magazine advertisements.^{14,17,20,21,23} We extensively pretested the coding scheme to ensure that coding categories were mutually exclusive and exhaustive¹⁶ and to improve interrater reliability. Table 1 describes how we defined our codes. Three trained reviewers, unaware of the study’s hypotheses, independently coded all advertisements. All discrepancies were noted and resolved through discussion. Overall, the interrater reliability rate was 89.3% before discrepancies were resolved. We determined the proportions of advertisements that fit defined codes with SPSS and tested for differences between time periods and between JEE and PW with χ^2 and Fisher exact tests for significance.

RESULTS

Documents

RJR’s strategy for targeting young adult African Americans had 2 major features. One was the reliance on the image of cigarettes as a “‘classy,’ ‘quality’ product associated with success and the ‘good life’” and an entrée into a “‘fantasy world’ that Black young adult smokers can be part of.”²⁴ The other was the building of close community relationships through involvement in community-based organizations, corporate giving, and corporate image advertising.²⁵ This article reports on the first of these 2 strategies.

According to the company’s internal documents, RJR has had in place for years special marketing programs designed to reach African Americans, beginning long before Uptown and persisting after Uptown had been canceled. In a 1988 speech, a senior RJR marketing official noted that

Reynolds Tobacco has made a special effort to reach Black Smokers since the early 1960’s. . . . The reason is simple. Consumer research has long shown that [this group does] not share all of the same desires and perceptions as the general market. . . . Where menthol smokers make up only 29 percent of the general market, almost 70 percent of Black smokers choose a menthol brand. That’s why special advertising and promotions for Salem cigarettes make a lot of sense in Black media and Black communities.²⁵

One measure of the success of these early targeting efforts was market share. In 1980, RJR’s market share among African American smokers was 35.3%.²⁶ By 1985, however, it had dropped to 30.4%,²⁶ owing largely to the lack of popularity of RJR brands among “younger adult smokers.” RJR’s share of this market was just 13%. Given that smokers

tend to be loyal to their brand, a tobacco company has a strong incentive for a smoker’s first brand to be 1 belonging to that company.²⁷ To compensate for slipping sales, RJR considered 3 possible strategies: attempting to increase sales of Salem (another of its mentholated brands) in the African American young adult market, introducing a new brand targeted at this population, or both. The decision about which path to pursue was to be made and remade over the years.

In 1985, RJR’s marketing department recommended against introducing a new brand, commenting that “the potential for a new brand targeted primarily to Blacks or Hispanics is limited. In addition, it is likely that such a brand could be viewed as patronizing.”²⁶ Instead, additional efforts were made to reposition Salem; the results were apparently unsatisfactory, however. By 1988, RJR had begun to pursue new brands, and it initiated an effort—labeled Project Delta—“to generate 3–5 short-term younger adult smoker brand ideas.”²⁸

The young adult smokers RJR had in mind included members of all racial/ethnic groups, members of both sexes,²⁷ and those who had “low incomes and [were] not attending college.”²⁸ Within a year, Project Delta had attached names to the brands it was creating; Uptown was 1 of 2 brands the task force recommended for immediate test marketing.²⁹ A senior marketing executive described Uptown as the company’s new product that would “go right after [Lorillard’s] Newport, which holds over 80% of the younger adult Black market.”³⁰ Announcing a commitment to spend more than \$415 million on RJR’s efforts to attract the young adult market, he added: “[The young adult smoker] share requires investment spending but it is like an annuity, paying dividends far into the future due to brand loyalty.”³⁰

Salem was to be continued, along with Uptown, as 2 prongs of RJR’s Black Initiative Program.³¹ RJR hoped to regain its share in the African American market with similar, locally focused advertising and promotional tactics for Salem and Uptown. Both brands drew upon “nightlife, entertainment, and music” themes,³² but the Uptown campaign focused on style, premium quality, and what it called an “ownable” look,

whereas Salem focused on fun, “mainstream acceptability,” and familiarity.³² In the case of each of these brands, RJR planned to reach young African American men aged 18 to 24 years. Such smokers were thought by RJR to be “motivated by style and good taste” to “purchase prestige products for ego-gratification and peer recognition/acceptance” and to “believe that the cigarette they smoke is a reflection of their good taste, success, and masculinity.”³³ Uptown was specially designed “to position a full flavor Menthol product against Newport among younger adult Black males.”³⁴

On the basis of market research, RJR decided to package Uptown cigarettes upside down in both 10- and 20-cigarette packs, believing that the “10’s configuration provides a unique means of addressing price sensitivity while maintaining premium quality brand image/status.”³¹ The upside-down packaging reflected RJR’s belief that African American smokers opened cigarettes from the bottom “to keep the filters fresh.”³⁴ Uptown was designed as a full flavor cigarette with lower levels of menthol than Salem.³¹ Uptown had a tar content of 19 mg and a nicotine content of 1.3 mg. Unfiltered Camels were the only other RJR product with higher tar and nicotine levels (22 mg of tar and 1.4 mg of nicotine).³⁵

Uptown deviated from the traditional blue/green color scheme of most menthol brands and used gold and black packaging to “reflect the premium/status image” of the brand.^{36,37} Uptown’s copy theme—“The Place, The Taste”—was designed to associate Uptown with a “place/fantasy world” and the “good life.”³² Advertising imagery featured couples photographed in urban, nightlife settings, participating in social or entertainment activities.^{36,37} RJR planned to use “targeted Black print media (*Jet*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, key newspapers)” and a heavy “outdoor presence.”³⁸ The advertising was to be supported by nightclub events, mobile video vans distributing samples and premiums, and additional retail incentives.³⁹

In December 1989, RJR issued a press release, carried in the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Philadelphia’s African American newspaper, announcing the launch of Uptown.⁴⁰ In the release, RJR specifically announced that the

brand was designed for the African American smoker. As a result of intense public pressure generated by the Uptown Coalition in the weeks that followed the press release, RJR canceled the test marketing and, eventually, all future plans for the Uptown cigarette.^{5–9} A 1990 Philip Morris memorandum, “Anatomy of a Failure—Uptown Cigarettes,”⁴¹ reported that RJR either miscalculated or underestimated the impact of launching a targeted brand in a “politically charged environment.” In particular, the memo pointed out that “[m]arketing cigarettes to minorities was not new, *saying so was*.”⁴¹

Despite the failure of Uptown, RJR did not abandon its effort to attract young adult African American smokers; the company planned to “continue development of a new brand with a premium menthol positioning designed to attract competitive smokers from Newport.” Not surprisingly, however, several staff members recommended that RJR “not seek press coverage for any new projects.”⁴²

In April 1989, before the launch of Uptown, RJR had initiated its Menthol Initiative Program (MIP). Documents produced in association with the program involved relatively consistent use of the word *menthol*, but the target was African American smokers. For example, in a February 1990 monthly report on the MIP originally titled “Black Initiative Monthly Marketing report,” “Black” was crossed out and “Menthol” was written in by hand.⁴³

The attempted launch of Uptown must be considered within the context of the larger MIP and the earlier Project Delta. In April 1990, several months after the cancellation of Uptown, the MIP, far from being shut down, was extended in an attempt to reach 80% of competitive target menthol smokers.⁴⁴ MIP existed before Uptown and was expanded when Uptown was discontinued.

Documents dating from 1994 indicate that MIP continued to “address nuances” of the African American market in the belief that “a highly visible commitment to social responsibility is fundamental to successful ethnic marketing.”⁴⁵ This strategy represented a combination of the marketing of existing brands and the building of close community relationships through support of local events and programs.¹¹

Advertisements

We used the cigarette advertisements we collected to test our hypotheses that RJR advertisements published in JEE would be more likely than such advertisements published in PW to (1) feature images of escape/fantasy or expensive items, (2) emphasize nightlife, and (3) promote mentholated brands. We also compared magazine advertisements appearing at the time of the introduction of Uptown with those running 10 years later to determine whether differences in marketing aimed toward African Americans and Whites persisted throughout the decade. Because the industry documents are less rich in content in the years following the establishment of the Minnesota Depository in 1998, a review of magazine advertisements is 1 way to observe the nature of the current marketing strategy.

In cases in which a setting could be determined, 100% of the RJR advertisements published in JEE during 1989–1990 portrayed an escape/fantasy setting, as compared with 85.7% of those published in PW ($P=.104$). Thus, advertisements published in both JEE and PW were likely to emphasize fantasy/escape. During 1999–2000, the advertisements in JEE continued to emphasize escape/fantasy, with 71.9% featuring this theme, but fantasy/escape was featured in only 30.8% of the advertisements in PW ($P<.001$).

During 1989–1990, in cases in which objects were visible, use of expensive objects was significantly more prevalent in JEE than in PW (73.4% vs 33.8%; $P<.001$), but a decade later this situation was reversed (15.9% vs 27.8%; $P=.007$). By 1999–2000, the number of visible objects had dropped considerably in JEE as a result of the presence of a Salem campaign labeled “It’s not what you expect.” This campaign involved heavy use of fantasy themes but few discernible objects, thus lowering the percentage of advertisements featuring high-end objects.

As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, RJR advertisements published in JEE that featured fun or social life were more likely than such advertisements published in PW to feature nightlife themes (1989–1990: 57.7% vs 27.7%, $P<.001$; 1999–2000: 77.8% vs 37.1%, $P=.130$). In the latter case, the rela-

TABLE 2—Content of RJR Advertisements Published in *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* (JEE) vs *People Weekly* (PW): 1989–1990

	JEE, No. (%)	PW, No. (%)	P
Escape/fantasy (when setting visible)	22 (100)	54 (85.7)	.104 ^a
Expensive objects (when objects visible)	73 (73.7)	47 (33.8)	<.001 ^b
Nightlife (when social life presented)	56 (57.7)	13 (27.7)	<.001 ^b
Menthol	99 (100)	44 (31.6)	<.001 ^b

^aFisher exact test.^b χ^2 test.**TABLE 3—Content of RJR Advertisements Published in *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* (JEE) vs *People Weekly* (PW): 1999–2000**

	JEE, No. (%)	PW, No. (%)	P
Escape/fantasy (when setting visible)	23 (71.9)	20 (30.8)	<.001 ^a
Expensive objects (when objects visible)	7 (15.9)	27 (27.8)	.007 ^a
Nightlife (when social life presented)	7 (77.8)	13 (37.1)	.130 ^b
Menthol	43 (97.7)	0 (0.0)	<.001 ^a

^a χ^2 test.^bFisher exact test.

tobacco advertising. Although previous content analyses of tobacco advertising have tracked changes in quantity and thematic content across time and across publications with different audiences,^{46–58} and some of these analyses have emphasized variations in thematic content in instances in which cigarette advertisements are targeted at African Americans,^{8,46,54,55,59–61} ours is the first study, to our knowledge, to have compared advertisements targeted at Whites and African Americans across a decade.

Another limitation of this study is that we focused solely on RJR, although other tobacco companies also engage in direct marketing campaigns.^{1,11,41} There is a need for further detailed research on other companies. In addition, we focused primarily on advertising and marketing related to specific brands, which is only 1 part of the targeting of a particular market segment. Advertising and marketing complement efforts by the industry to build relationships with the African American community through activities such as event sponsorship and employment opportunities.^{1,3,11}

Our findings have several important implications for tobacco control research and practice. The defeat of the Uptown cigarette demonstrated that locally based advocacy can make a difference; just 6 weeks after RJR announced the launch of Uptown, the product was canceled. A key lesson from our research, however, is that the need for such advocacy is ongoing. RJR's efforts to target African Americans did not end with Uptown.

In addition, RJR identified, through its qualitative and quantitative research programs, the fact that important themes for reaching African Americans are nightlife and fantasy/escape, and these themes are used in the company's advertising. Tobacco control groups may want to investigate whether these themes can be used creatively in countermarketing efforts, for example, by testing the effectiveness of advertising that attempts to shift social norms toward smoke-free nightlife.

Moreover, to be effective in helping all populations remain tobacco-free, tobacco control practitioners must understand and recognize tobacco industry strategies for targeting various groups, whether in terms of race/ethnicity, class, or shared attitudes and lifestyles.² Researchers can assist with these efforts by

tively high *P* value reflects the fact that few JEE advertisements published in 1999–2000 featured fun or social life themes and thus could not reflect nightlife themes.

As we anticipated, in both time periods, RJR advertisements appearing in JEE were significantly more likely to feature mentholated brands than were advertisements appearing in PW; 100% of JEE advertisements published in 1989–1990 featured mentholated brands, and 97.3% published in 1999–2000 featured these brands. The corresponding percentages for PW were 31.6% and 0% (*P* < .001 in both cases).

DISCUSSION

The Uptown Coalition's ability to force RJR to cancel Uptown cigarettes was a watershed event in tobacco control with far-reaching implications for grassroots advocacy. Uptown marked the first product cancellation forced by a community grassroots organization.^{1,4–7} However, it is apparent, from an analysis of the advertising carried in JEE (particularly in contrast to that carried in PW) and from a review of tobacco industry documents, that

RJR's marketing strategy was fairly stable during the study period.

A content analysis of the advertisements RJR was running in JEE during the period in which Uptown was introduced confirms that RJR's strategy, as planned for Uptown, was largely implemented via other RJR brands. The advertising campaign featured mentholated cigarettes, fantasy or escape from reality, expensive objects, and nightlife themes, and elements of this campaign persisted throughout the decade. Nightlife and fantasy/escape from reality continued to be important themes, and mentholated cigarettes still dominated the advertising a decade later in JEE relative to PW.

A potential limitation of this study and other studies focusing on tobacco documents is that some important documents may have been overlooked, rendering incomplete or inaccurate conclusions about industry behavior. This possible limitation was offset by our study design, which involved the use of 2 distinct data sources (documents and magazine advertisements) to describe and document a tobacco company's behavior. Our findings also make a unique contribution to studies of

conducting systematic searches of industry documents, supported by the evidence uncovered that the industry executes planned strategies. Tobacco control advocates can use such sources to expose industry strategies, and we encourage researchers to post their documents on publicly available Web sites so that tobacco control programs and advocacy organizations can use them.

Finally, advocacy campaigns based on exposing industry strategies have been shown to be effective with adolescents and young adults.^{62–64} Such campaigns might be used to expose RJR's long-standing efforts to target African Americans through marketing of mentholated brands and the manipulation of images such as escapism, fantasy, and nightlife. ■

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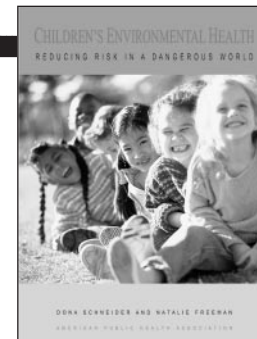
Human Participant Protection

The institutional review board of the Tufts University School of Medicine found that this research did not involve human participants and did not require review board approval.

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